

The Best Hands in the Game

Vlad Shulman never touches a basketball. He's never enjoyed the devotion of fans. But he's helped lead the Celtics through one dynasty and, just maybe, into another. **By Tom Matlack**



Kendrick Perkins's left shoulder is sore and it's two minutes to game time, so a silver-haired Russian man is kneading the 6-foot-10 center's massive arm. Then the man moves down the bench to vigorously rub Paul Pierce's left calf. The Friday-night Garden crowd is buzzing, anticipating another blockbuster outing for the men in green—but it is this busy

masseur who is tonight's secret weapon, and perhaps the key to an upcoming championship.

He is 61-year-old Vlad Shulman, a former Russian national handball team coach who came into his current occupation after emigrating in the 1970s. Though he's been with the team for decades—a rare connective thread

between the Celts of yore and today's contenders—he's mostly unknown to fans and reporters, because the team bars its operations staff from speaking to the media (or posing for photographs) during the season. But ask players about Shulman, and they all say the same thing: He's the unsung hero, the man with the magic touch. "Vlad definitely allows us to play longer because he puts his hands on us," Ray Allen says. "He's a reader of people. He knows to a tee what everybody needs on this team."

Players show an unusually strong devotion to Shulman, and always have. (Back in the team's heyday, he even had Thanksgiving dinners with Larry Bird's family.) Some departing Celts, it's been rumored, have offered to double or triple Shulman's salary if he'd leave the team and become their personal masseur. The hoops stars say it's because Shulman cares: He gets to know them, their strengths, even their slang, but is stern if they're slacking. "A fat wolf can't hunt," he'll tell the guys who need more time in the gym. It's tough love, and in turn, they jokingly call him "KGB." Shulman shows a softer side on airplane rides, though: He's afraid of flying, and turns to Tony Allen for reassurance.

Phobias aside, Shulman relishes his job—which is all to the team's benefit, players say. "I love him," Tony Allen confesses. "I wouldn't trade him for anybody in the world."